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## The Costly Shield

The revelation by President Johnson that Soviet Premier Kosygin has agreed to high-level discussions on limiting both defensive and offensive missiles should produce a national sigh of relief. The Kosygin letter alleviates the pressure for an immediate decision on whether or not this nation should proceed without delay to deploy a costly and questionable anti-ballistic missile shield.

The debate has already created a sharp division in the top echelon of the presidential advisors. General Earl G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently confirmed what has in fact been common knowledge for months: He and the Secretary of Defense are the leaders of the two opposing camps.

Both men agree on the basic facts of the situation. The Russians are known to have begun deployment of an ABM system. In addition, the Russians have begun to strengthen their offensive missile capability. The cost, to the United States, of a nationwide ABM system would be approximately \$40 billion.

McNamara's position, reduced to its simplest terms, is that the system now being deployed by the Soviets is a waste of time and money. The United States, he insists, is capable of penetrating the Soviet defense in a retaliatory strike to a degree that would destroy every major Russian city, leaving 120 million dead. Furthermore, McNamara believes, the Russians are capable of increasing their striking power so as to overwhelm our proposed Nike X defensive system.

The only result, therefore, of a deployment by both sides, would be a resumption of the arms race, an open-ended escalation in which increased defenses would be countered by increased strike capability, followed by a greater defensive effort, and so on. And always the net result would remain the

same: Each side would retain the ability to destroy the other. The only hope of avoiding fantastic and pointless expense, McNamara believes, lies in convincing the Russians that their system is worthless and that the needless race should be called off. And so far, McNamara has the President's backing.

General Wheeler's position is that the chance for a diplomatic solution to the problem appears past. The Russians are already deploying their system, giving them a head start of at least two years. He also argues—and this is perhaps his most telling point—that the most important consideration is not whether the Russians in fact have an effective shield against nuclear missiles. What counts is whether they *think* they have protection. For their policies and their diplomatic postures will be determined by their own assessment of their ability to survive a nuclear exchange. Indeed, the greatest threat of nuclear war lies in a situation where one of the two superpowers underestimates the other's nuclear capability. One nation will be wrong in its judgment, but mutual destruction could be the price of finding out which has erred.

Now the Johnson-Kosygin exchange provides at least a brief breathing spell before the final decisive decision must be taken. This does not mean that the public debate should be suspended. It is, on the contrary, vital that the subject be aired in a dispassionate and non-political national discussion, so that if the talks with the Soviets prove fruitless, we shall not be forced to consider the problem in an atmosphere of crisis and indecision.

For the question under consideration involves much more than vast amounts of the national treasury. The final decision may well determine the future survival of this nation, this civilization and this world.

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